

BAY-BREAKER

Photography by Judith Calson / Text by Walter Blum





Marathon cold-water swimmer Suzanne Heim has all the right stuff: courage, stamina — and a little madness.

MILES OF INVITING ocean and Bay, but how many of us try to swim in it? Not those who have any sense. Because everyone knows that the waters hereabouts are like ice and you can quickly freeze to death if you stay in for anything longer than a quick dip. The tides are monstrous and the waves can daunt even the hardiest. Thus, it takes a truly remarkable athlete to go for *distance* swims in this sort of water, someone with super stamina and strength, someone with the ability to resist any kind of exposure and cold.

Someone like Suzanne Heim.

Heim is a cold-water swimmer, possibly the best of a rare breed. Without a qualm, she will climb into water that ranges between 48 and 58 degrees, protected only by a greasy layer of lanolin spread over her skin. She has broken all kinds of speed records and set a few that no one else ever tried before in waters like ours. In October 1983, for instance, she broke the record for swimming the Golden Gate — 18 minutes and 56 seconds — as well as the record for four laps across the Gate. She has done a prison-to-prison swim, from San Quentin to Alcatraz, and a Bay-to-Breakers swim that took two hours and five minutes to complete, beating the time of many who were competing on land. There are some who think she is courageous, others who claim she's foolhardy and a few who wonder if she might not be a little mad.

Why does she do it? According to Heim, it's the challenge that excites her. "When I try out a swim," she says, "I keep thinking: 'Hey, I did that and it was real feasible. Let's see if I

can try something else.' So I'm always testing myself."

The nemesis of cold-water swimmers is hypothermia, a sudden chilling of the body that leaves the swimmer disoriented, lightheaded and turning blue. If not treated in time, hypothermia can be fatal. For some reason, Suzanne Heim appears immune to this dread condition. She has never had to be pulled out of the water for hypothermia.

Dr. James Rappaport, an orthopedic surgeon at San Francisco General Hospital who has accompanied Heim on some of her swims, can only theorize why that is. "Part of it's conditioning, and part of it is her mental attitude and getting used to operating just on the borderline of hypothermia," he says. "In some ways she is a little bit different from most — better insulation, more tolerance to cooler temperatures. But she's never actually been studied. I'm thinking of doing something like that, putting electrodes on her while she swims with a small transmitter, so we can find out what's going on."

Perhaps Heim's most amazing feat was a 27-mile swim last July from the Carquinez Strait to the Golden Gate. Starting at 4:30 a.m. in pitch darkness (so she could avoid the later morning "chop"), she passed under three bridges and was within sight of the Gate when the tide changed.

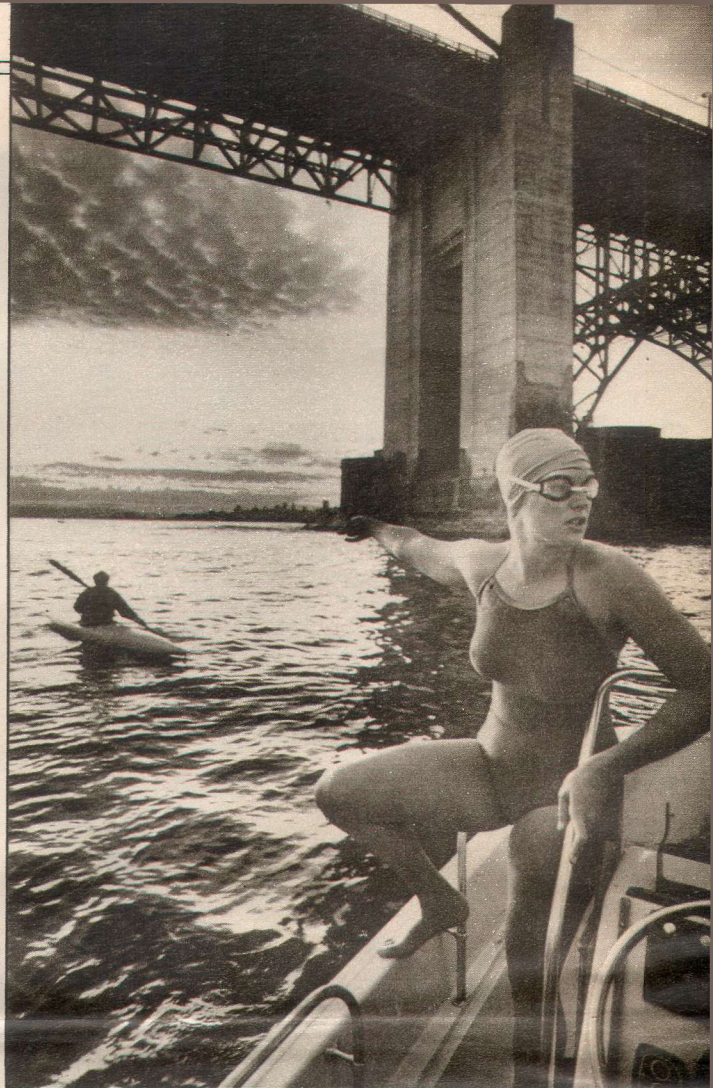
"It was the most frustrating thing," she recalls, "like dangling a carrot in front of a donkey. I had to battle the tide all the way, and that's not exactly what you want after you've already swum almost 27 miles."

Rappaport, who was along that day, remembers testing her with a

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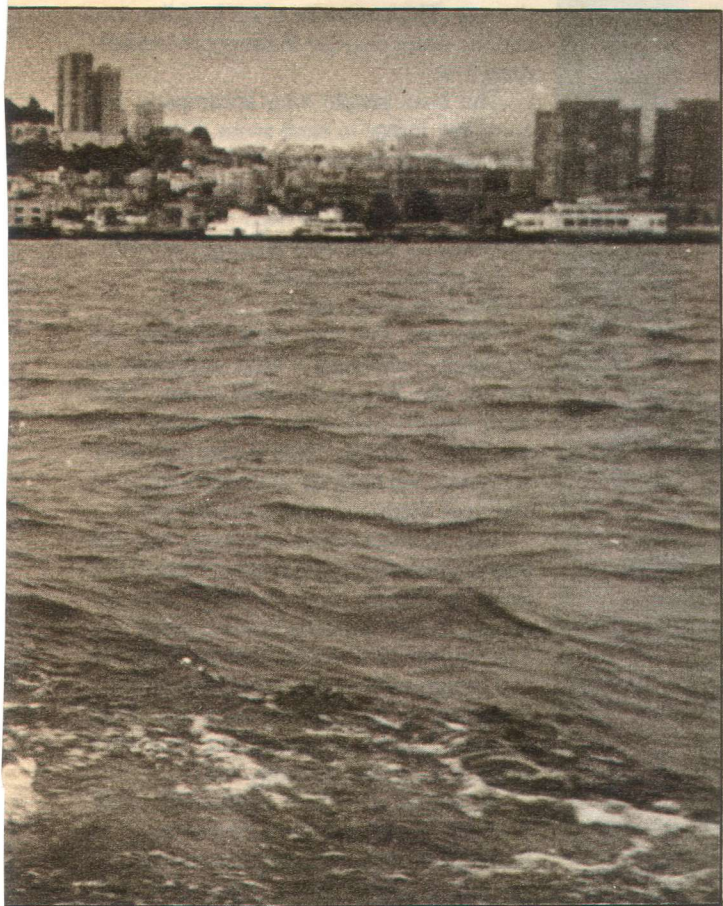
Anyway, we have an understanding — I don't eat them and they don't eat me."



standard medical thermometer after she came out. "The thermometer only went down to 36 degrees centigrade [96.8 Fahrenheit]," he says, his voice hushed with awe, "so we never did get a reading. But the amazing thing was that she was hardly shivering at all."

Like most long-distance swimmers, Heim makes it standard procedure to swim along with a boatload of people — friends, fellow members of the Dolphin Club, whoever is willing to assist. For one thing, she needs help with food. "I do get hungry," she says, "and anything tastes better than saltwater." She pauses from time to time for sips of a liquid concoction consisting of honey, bananas, peanut butter and

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[SPORTS]



water. The fact that it is liquid is important. "Even though you're swimming through miles of water," says Rappaport, "you can still become dehydrated."

Before starting a swim, Heim makes a practice of researching the route. "A lot of old-timers will help you," she says. Or she'll visit the Bay model in Sausalito to get an overall picture of what she's facing. "I need to know what land masses are in the way. There are a lot of back eddies, too, and the water changes in proportion to how deep it is."

The boat people who accompany her are a key factor in each swim. She enjoys the feeling of camaraderie, the knowledge that her swims are really a team effort. "And," she says, "you need plenty of eyes to watch, to make sure nothing's around."

Like sharks? She nods.

Ever encounter one?

"No, but I've met some amorous sea elephants," she says. "That happened to me on the Bay-to-Breakers swim. They were curious and swam right along with me. But no sharks." She shakes her head. "Anyway, we have an understanding — I don't eat them and they don't eat me."

Her trickiest swim, she says, was the four-lap crossing of the Golden Gate. "The water is coming into the Bay," she explains, "but at the same time it's going out. That is, part of it floods in underneath the two bridge anchorages, but along the sides it's going in the opposite direction. That means you can't swim straight. You have to go in a zig-zag, squiggly run."

A sturdy five-foot-eight-inch, 150-pounder, Heim was born 25 years ago in San Rafael, where she began swimming at the age of four. "By the time I reached

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—[SPORTS]—

high school I was burned out," she admits. She turned to cross-country running and played water polo with the boys' team. "By the end of the season it was just like I was part of the team. Of course, in high school I could hold my own on the boys' team. In college I wouldn't even think of it."

Graduating from California Polytechnic Institute in San Luis Obispo, she got a masters degree in special education from Dominican College and now teaches a class of multiple-handicapped young people at the Oakview School in Marin. She's an accomplished musician and often uses her piano, recorder and guitar skills in her work.

The career is essential because there is no money in long-distance, cold-water swimming. Even the Olympics have yet to come up with such a category. But if there were some way of swinging it, Heim would love to give the English Channel a try. Since Gertrude Ederle first succeeded in 1926, many women have made the 21-mile crossing, the record-holder being a Californian named Penny Dean.

Heim sees no reason why she couldn't do it, too. "The currents are real tricky," she says, "but so are the currents in San Francisco Bay."

The big problem is money. "It costs about \$10,000 to get over there, rent boats and spend the two weeks you need," she says. "But I know the woman who holds the record, and I'm as fast as she is. And the water's much warmer than it is here — around 63 degrees. [It runs between 48 and 58 degrees in Northern California.] I think some of the swims I've done are as difficult as the Channel." She looks off into the distance.

"I'd sure like to give it a try," she says. □